Beckett's guignol worlds: Arnold Geulincx and Heinrich von Kleist

David Tucker (University of Sussex, UK)

This article explores how certain of Beckett's interests in philosophy inform the imagery of puppetry in Act Without Words 1 *(1956) and Still" (1972). In bringing together his reading of the seventeenth-century philosopher of Occasionalism, Arnold Geulincx, with the theorist of puppet-grace, Heinrich von Kleist, Beckett created an entirely new visual vocabulary that seamlessly fused particular conceptions of unselfconscious grace with purposeful cruelty. He thereby also reconciled, in discrete and visceral images on the stage and page, his younger autodidactic philosophical research with restless impetuses to make things anew much later in life. An image as seemingly straightforward as a hand rising to meet a head can mark a significant climax in Beckett's creative career, locating parts of his late period as characterised by an imagistic philosophical poetics.*

Geulincx and the "guignol world"

In December 1935, Beckett returned to his family home in the south Dublin suburb of Foxrock for Christmas. He arrived from London, where he had been living, and struggling with the composition of his first published novel, *Murphy*. His correspondence with Thomas McGreevy gives some insightful clues to that novel's fitful progress. *Murphy* had been started months earlier, around the middle of August 1935.[1] By 22 September Beckett had written about 9,000 words. This rose to 20,000 over the follow-

[1] See John Pilling, *A Samuel* Beckett Chronology (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 55.

ing couple of weeks.[2] Beckett described how the labor of *Murphy*'s composition had "little excitement attached to it" and, despite working hard at it, the book was proceeding "very slowly" (*Letters*, 283). Upon his arrival back in Ireland, things did not improve immediately for Beckett. He became quite ill, and was forced to spend a week in bed with a bout of pleurisy.

In January 1936, however, while still recovering from illness, work on *Murphy* was to be reinvigorated by a determined period of autodidactic research. Venturing within what he called "the abhorred gates"[3] of Trinity College, Dublin (hereafter TCD) library for the first time since resigning from a teaching post at the university four years earlier, Beckett embarked on a three-month period of highly organized and focused research into the obscure seventeenth-century philosopher of what history has dubbed "Occasionalism," Arnold Geulincx. Beckett revisited the library at TCD numerous times between January and April 1936 to transcribe over fifty pages of notes in the original Latin from three of Geulincx's major works found in the collected three-volume edition *Arnoldi Geulincx: Anverpiensis Opera Philosophica*, edited by Jan Pieter Nicolaas Land, published between 1891 and 1893.

Beckett was fascinated by Geulincx's obscure and idiosyncratic philosophy. Indeed, he even speculated in correspondence with McGreevy that it was precisely the fact that "the text is so hard to come by" (*Letters*, 318) that drew him to the philosopher's Latin volumes in TCD, after discovering Ireland's National Library did not hold copies. On the other hand, in the same letter Beckett also acknowledged what he called his "instinct" for Geulincx's work, a less rationalized intimation of affinity, or an exploratory need to know. Geulincx's singular project of completing the Cartesian program in an epistemologically grounded, rationalist, Christian-mystical ethics

[2] See Samuel Beckett to McGreevy, 22 September 1935 in Martha Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, eds., *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 1: 1929-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 277; and Beckett to McGreevy, 8 October 1935 (283).

[3] Beckett to McGreevy, 9 January 1936. In Matthijs Engelberts, Everett Frost and Jane Maxwell, eds., *Notes diverse holo – Catalogues of Beckett's Reading Notes and other Manuscripts at Trinity College Dublin, with Supporting Essays*, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 16 (2006) (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006), 144.

was not simply a blind spot in Beckett's private records of the history of Western philosophy, though his interest in the topic had been piqued a few years earlier by reading Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy*. Geulincx's melding together of diverse ideas into something wholly new, a system that was, despite its variety, thoroughly cohered by a foregrounding of ignorance and impotence – the thoroughgoing incapacity of humanity to do anything in the world – certainly strikes a chord with what we know in hindsight of Beckett's aesthetic development over the decades after 1936. And while Beckett's commitment to this research was not so disciplined as to reach the end of Geulincx's major *Ethica*, his handwritten and then typed transcriptions (and re-transcriptions) from this work as well as from *Metaphysica Vera* testify to a deep immersion in this philosopher's thought, as well as to the more prosaic desire to escape the sometimes claustrophobic family house.

Picking up the word *occasion* that was left underdeveloped by Descartes's discussions of mind-body interaction, Geulincx argued that the only way anyone can be said to do anything at all, the only way that anything can be said to have *occasion* for occurring, is due to the agency of God. My mind, like Murphy's mind when his body is hushed into stillness in his chair, is cut off from the physical world unless and until God deigns to forge connections between them. This God does, fortunately, and continually, evidenced by the fact that things in the physical world do indeed move. Yet Geulincx argues that I cannot be the cause of any action or thought because I cannot articulate (and so, his rationalist epistemology goes, I cannot be said to know) clearly and with reason *how* such a thing happens. It is this interest in epistemology that primarily distinguishes Geulincx's Occasionalism from that of his contemporaries Nicholas Malebranche (1638-1715), Louis de la Forge (1632-1666), and Géraud de Cordemoy (1614-1684). In defining what might qualify as knowledge stated of an event, such that knowledge passes his stringent epistemic tests, Geulincx argues that even an anatomist (in a paradigm of scientific knowledge) cannot properly say how their arm is moved. There is, according to Geulincx, something missing from a purely physical account of such movement, of blood flow and what he calls the movement of "animal spirits." Anatomy does not reach, cannot speak of, the ineffable how of causation that is missing from such an ac-

count. Geulincx describes such scientific knowledge as merely *a posteriori*, according to which it is "no more than a consciousness and perception of *the fact that* motion is taking place."[4] It is not a substantive explanation of *how* that motion takes place.

This ineffable *how* is hugely important for Geulincx, for it is with his idea of the ineffable that Geulincx distils and fuses his contrasting impetuses as a rationalist-Christian-mystic. Something is "ineffable" for Geulincx because it cannot be articulated with rational discourse:

> Something is said to be *ineffable* not because we cannot speak or think of it (for this would be *nothing*, *nothing* and *unthinkable* being the same), but because we cannot think about or encompass with our reason how it is done.

> As Geulincx writes, "an ineffable something is always missing" (*Ethics*, 334); there always remains a residue of experience not exhausted by knowledge of that experience. Only God, as Arsene in *Watt* might say of "what has so happily been called the unutterable or ineffable,"[5] can properly know such ineffable forces. For limited, non-knowing humanity, Geulincx would concur with the servant's appraisal that "any attempt to utter or eff it is doomed to fail, doomed, doomed to fail" (*Watt*, 61).

Beckett's period of 1936 research into Geulincx's philosophy has been known of for many years, and has been acknowledged a number of times. The research's temporal contiguity with the composition of the final stages of *Murphy*, and the many references to Geulincx in the book, have concomitantly led critics to discuss that novel as, to cite Ruby Cohn's characterization from 1960, by far "the most Geulincxian of the works."[6] Cohn was discussing an article by Samuel Mintz that had appeared in a special issue of *Transition*

---

[4] Arnold Geulincx, *Ethics: with Samuel Beckett's Notes*, edited by Han van Ruler and Anthony Uhlmann, translated by Martin Wilson (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 228 (emphasis added).

[5] Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, edited by C. J. Ackerley (London: Faber, 2009), 61.

[6] Ruby Cohn, "A Note on Beckett, Dante, and Geulincx," *Comparative Literature*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Winter 1960): 93-94.

(1959).[7] In that first article on Beckett's critical and creative relationship with Geulincx, Mintz cites, as he was obliged to do and as others must also do when discussing the "Geulincxian" aspects of *Murphy*, the moment at which the novel's narrator climactically describes their protagonist's selfhood. Getting to what is, for Murphy, the crux of the matter (that matter being, narcissistically, the very nature of Murphy himself) becomes, in turn, a matter of philosophy. Specifically, for Murphy this is a matter that could and should be placed in the terms in which Geulincx summarizes his ethical philosophy, in the axiom *ubi nihil vales*, *ibi nihil velis*, translated in the 2006 publication of *Ethica* as "*wherein you have no power, therein you should not will*" (*Ethics*, 337) (though critics have previously translated this as "where you are worth nothing, there you should want nothing,"[8] following Beckett's own translation of the axiom in *Murphy*). The Geulingian nature of Murphy's self is the paradigm according to which, at a crucial moment, Murphy commits himself to the "little world" of his interiority:

> His vote was cast. 'I am not of the big world, I am of the little world' was an old refrain with Murphy, and a conviction, two convictions, the negative first. How should he tolerate, let alone cultivate, the occasions of fiasco, having once beheld the beatific idols of his cave? In the beautiful Belgo-Latin of Arnold Geulincx: *Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis.*[9]

In his ethical conviction Murphy also commits himself to the asylum, and so to the ignominious fate that imprisonment as a consequence of this commitment eventually brings. Murphy is responsible for "two convictions" as two commitments – firstly his ethical belief, but secondly his (self-) imprisonment, his being unable to escape his death in an asylum along with the rest of the *committed*.

There are further reasons for critics to explore *Murphy*'s Geulingian

[7] See Samuel Mintz, "Beckett's Murphy: A Cartesian Novel," *Perspective*, vol. 11 (Autumn 1959): 156-165.

[8] C.J. Ackerley, *Demented Particulars: The Annotated Murphy* (Tallahassee, FL: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2008), 157.

[9] Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, edited by J.C.C. Mays (London: Faber, 2009), 112.

themes and specific allusions. In 1967 Beckett wrote to Sighle Kennedy in response to questions the latter had sent about how "the critical statements in your essay '*Dante…Bruno.Vico..Joyce*"' might "serve as a valid yardstick for measurement of your later work."[10] Beckett wrote, in an oft-cited letter:

> I simply do not feel the presence in my writings as a whole of the Proust & Joyce situations you evoke. If I were in the unenviable position of having to study my work my points of departure would be the "Naught is more real…" and the "Ubi nihil vales…" both already in *Murphy* and neither very rational.[11]

Whenever Beckett mentions his work in correspondence in the context of his fascination with Geulincx, it is always *Murphy* that must somehow bear the weight of the obscure reference. This widely cited letter to Kennedy (which is reprinted in *Disjecta*)[12] broadly repeats the kinds of thoughts Beckett had expressed a number of times to other correspondents while he was researching Geulincx thirty years earlier.

However, further correspondence – parts of which remain unpublished – complicates what might otherwise appear to be a fairly straightforward lineage of commentary by Beckett on his interest in Geulincx. In late 1956 Beckett wrote to the writer and lifelong friend of T.S. Eliot, Mary Hutchinson,[13] in a very similar way to how he would write to Kennedy some eleven years later:

> I feel more and more something that is almost if not quite a loathing for almost everything I have written and simply cannot bear to go back over it and into it. If there is a queer real there

[10] Kennedy to Beckett, 7 May 1967. In Sighle Kennedy, *Murphy's Bed: A Study of Real Sources and Sur-Real Associations in Samuel Beckett's First Novel* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1971), 302.

[11] Beckett to Kennedy, 14 June 1967. In Kennedy, *Murphy's Bed*, 300.

[12] Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by Ruby Cohn (London: Calder, 1983), 113.

[13] Hutchinson, a member of the Bloomsbury group, published a book of short stories in 1927 entitled *Fugitive Pieces*. See Pilling, *Chronology*, 235.

> somewhere it is the Abderites, mentioned in Murphy, complicated by – ibidem – the Geulincx 'ubi nihil vales etc.' I suppose these are its foci and where a commentary might take its rise. But I really do not know myself – and don't want to know – par quel bout le prendre [by whatever end it is grabbed], and can't help anyone.[14]

Beckett and Hutchinson then corresponded further on the subject of Geulincx, and on 28 November Beckett referred to his difficulties of twenty years earlier in locating editions of Geulincx's works. He also described Geulincx's ontological foregrounding of incapacity and dependence upon God as a world of puppetry, a world in which God is the all-powerful puppet-master and people are His puppets, entirely reliant on God for their capacities of movement:

> Geulincx hard to come by. I read him in TCD library, the National Library didn't boast the Ethics. Frightful kitchen Latin but fascinating guignol world.[15]

Beckett's assessment in this letter of Geulincx's language complicates the earlier admiration voiced in *Murphy* for the "beautiful Belgo-Latin." Also very intriguing is Beckett's description of Geulincx's world as "guignol," a world of puppetry. Guignol himself was a French forerunner of the English puppet Punch, and colloquial French use of his name is as an insult, despite the fact that Guignol himself is witty and tends to triumph over adverse circumstances. The puppet was designed as a peasant figure intended to represent provincial men from the Dauphiné region by the puppet-master Laurent Mourguet (1769-1844). As will be argued below, however, there is more to Beckett's reference than just this character.

Tropes of puppetry appear throughout Beckett's *oeuvre* from his earliest works written before the 1936 Geulincx research. In "Love and Lethe," for example, the courting couple are likened to puppets not fully in control

[14] Beckett to Hutchinson, 7 November 1956. Mary Hutchinson Papers, Series II, Subseries B, box 2, folder 4, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRHRC).

[15] Beckett to Hutchinson, 28 November 1956. Mary Hutchinson Papers, Series II, Subseries B, box 2, folder 4, HRHRC.

of their actions, who appear to the narrator, and therefore also to the reader, as not especially authentic:

> Like fantoccini controlled by a single wire they flung themselves down on the western slope of heath. From now on till the end there is something very secco and Punch and Judy about their proceedings […][16]

This critique of Belacqua and his lover Ruby Tough is, perhaps, just as much a self-deprecating comment on the abilities of the narrator as a personal judgment about the characters' "character."

The narrator of *Murphy* insists along similar lines that their star protagonist is distinguished from the other characters in the novel precisely in being the only one properly free from constraint:

> All the puppets in this book whinge sooner or later, except Murphy, who is not a puppet. (*Murphy*, 78)

Yet Murphy's self-determination, manifested in his rejection of Suk's horoscope, and his refusal to search out a job, for example, or again, refusing to explain himself to curious onlookers such as Ticklepenny, comes with its own problems that undermine the distinction conferred by the narrator. In July 1936, shortly after finishing writing the novel, Beckett described Murphy's apartness to McGreevy; this time he admitted its flaw:

> There seemed to me always the risk of taking him too seriously and separating him too sharply from the others. As it is I do not think the mistake (Aliosha mistake) has been altogether avoided.[17]

[16] Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks*, edited by Cassandra Nelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 87 ("fantoccini" – "puppet" or "doll;" "secco" – "dry").

[17] Beckett to McGreevy, 7 July 1936 (*Letters*, 350). Beckett's reference to Aliosha is to one of the brothers in Dostoevsky's *The Karamazov Brothers*.

Murphy's freedom, the thing that Murphy takes most seriously, separates him from the other puppets of the novel a little too baldly; he thereby becomes a different kind of puppet.

Similarly, the narrator of *The Unnamable* describes himself as being "in my Punch and Judy box,"[18] and promises to finish telling their stories once "a few puppets" contrived for "company" (2, 1) have been scattered. When using the tropes of puppetry, then, Beckett is most frequently concerned with how puppets and puppetry might function as framing imagery for a fictional character – for a writer's, or narrator's "vice-exister" (26) as *The Unnamable* dubs it – and for that character's dependence on the controlling, behind-the-scenes puppet-master that is the author.

Moreover, such puppetry of Beckett's early and middle periods, specifically the puppetry of a "guignol world" that owes a debt to Beckett's 1936 fascinations with Geulincx, finds a reinvigorated and particularly focused manifestation in certain of Beckett's late works. Indeed, there are specific and identifiable reasons for Beckett's early concerns being reinvigorated. In introducing these arguments, focus will shift some twenty years after Beckett's early research, to the short mime *Act Without Words 1*, before going on to look at the even later prose text "Still."

Act Without Words 1

Beckett appears to have also had such guignol worlds – worlds in which humanity depends upon an anonymous and invisible puppet master – very much in his mind in 1956. The 28 November letter to Hutchinson in which he described Geulincx's "fascinating guignol world" was written around the time Beckett was working on the play he nicknamed, in a letter to Alan Schneider on 15 October 1956, "the desert mime."[19] This short mime, *Act Without Words 1,* presents a man taunted in a desert, a man

[18] Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, edited by Steven Connor (London: Faber, 2010), 53.

[19] Beckett to Alan Schneider, 15 October 1956. Cited in Maurice Harmon, ed., *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 12.

whom Beckett later described as "human meat – or bones."[20] The nameless man is pushed and pulled around by an offstage, unseen authority, sometimes even with the explicit use of ropes, indicating the figure's status as a mere puppet for forms of manipulation and torture. A number of critics including Ackerley, Matthew Feldman and Shane Weller, argue that at least in part (to quote Feldman), "Beckett's source for *Act Without Words 1* is […] Köhler via Woodworth."[21] This reading refers back to Beckett's psychology notes of 1935, where he transcribed a passage from Robert Woodworth's *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* that describes Wolfgang Köhler's experiments recorded in *The Mentality of Apes*. Beckett noted that he should read Köhler's book (though there are no extant records that he did in fact go on to do so), and recorded Woodworth's summary of Köhler's experiments conducted in Tenerife of 1913-1917, many of which involved chimpanzees and monkeys trying to reach food baskets and single food items suspended from above by climbing trees or standing on boxes, sometimes boxes stacked (usually precariously) one upon the other. The imagery evoked, diagrammed and even reproduced in nine photographs by Köhler in *The Mentality of Apes* is certainly suggestive of "the action and setting,"[22] as Ackerley describes them, of *Act Without Words 1*. The heated confines of a pen in Tenerife, for example, might go some way to accounting for why Beckett chose a "desert" as the uncharacteristic setting for the mime.

Weller argues on this topic, referring specifically to a female chimpanzee observed by Köhler who would wrap her own arms around herself when she wanted to be held:

> the movement in his [Beckett's] later dramatic works towards a purely bodily language is arguably a movement towards the language of an animal, not as what the Oxford English Dic-

[20] Quoted in S.E. Gontarski, "'Birth Astride of a Grave': Samuel Beckett's *Act Without Words 1*," in *The Beckett Studies Reader* (Gainsville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1993), 31.

[21] Mathew Feldman, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's "Interwar Notes"* (London: Continuum, 2006), 106.

[22] C.J. Ackerley, *Demented Particulars: The Annotated Murphy*, second edition (Tallahassee, FL: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2004), 37.

> tionary terms a being "endowed with life, sensation, and voluntary motion," but as a suffering being, defined by lack not in Descartes's, Kant's, or Heidegger's sense, but because this being 'experiences' lack and 'expresses' that lack by making of her own body both a stage and a substitute.[23]

Weller's incorporation of Beckett's much earlier reading about Köhler under a broader banner of "suffering" reconciles the very differently shaped ideas with which Beckett appears to have himself been experimentally building *Act Without Words 1*. That is to say, if Köhler is important to Beckett as some kind of "source" for this mime, then *why* this might be so is as important a question as the comparative *how*.[24] As will be argued, multifaceted dynamics of suffering operate within both *Act Without Words 1* and "Still," understandings of which can be deepened if we move beyond Köhler and the apes, and into the more abstract territory of puppetry.[25]

The man enters the stage of *Act Without Words 1* "flung backwards"; he is whistled back offstage and is flung back on again twice before he "hesitates, thinks better of it, halts, turns aside, reflects."[26] The whistle continues to direct his action, calling his attention to objects or locations on

---

[23] Shane Weller, "Not Rightly Human: Beckett and Animality," *Borderless Beckett/Beckett sans frontiers: Tokyo 2006*, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2008), 218.

[24] The congruity between the imagery in Köhler's study and *Act Without Words 1* is both striking and surprising; it is highly unusual that Beckett would take such imagery as so straightforward and thoroughgoing a "source" for an entire work, albeit a short work, as is maintained by Feldman and Ackerley, particularly when there is a gap of some twenty years between his reading Woodworth and writing *Act Without Words 1*. The unknown quantity in such a direct extrapolation from Köhler to this mine is this intervening twenty years, and whether or not Beckett ever made good on his note to himself to read *The Mentality of Apes* in the original. The book was not in Beckett's Paris library, though that proves little.

[25] *Act Without Words 1* has indeed been produced as a mime using puppets. In 1964 Bruno and Guido Bettiol made a ten-minute film of the mime using puppets, and in 1983 Margaret Jordan filmed a seventeen-minute animated version (source: British Film Institute).

[26] Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape and Other Shorter Plays*, preface by S.E. Gontarski (London: Faber, 2009), 41.

stage. It makes him aware of the palm tree, carafe of relieving water, the scissors with which he attempts to cut the rope and ponders how they might also sever his neck, and the cubes with which he builds. But it is perhaps the ropes of the play that most forcefully illustrate him as puppet. The text does not specify how any of the objects should be lowered, only stating a rope when one is dropped for the man to climb up (the "umbilical rope"[27] as Gontarski describes it in an Existentialist reading), which he then severs with the scissors. Yet the practicalities of performance dictate that objects would be lowered either by rope or some other kind of thread, amenable to being hoisted slower or more quickly as the text specifies. Such ties are akin to those of a puppet, and as the man reaches up to the water, bundles cubes on each other and falls off them trying to reach skywards like Köhler's apes, his movements appear as those of a marionette. Though, importantly, a marionette separated from his puppeteer. As the water is lowered so the man raises his hands, and as the cubes are deposited so he goes to them. He is brought "*hither*" to act "*here*" just as for Geulincx God brings humanity into the world to act here, connected invisibly and conducted entirely at the mercy of this unknowable, unspeakable, "ineffable" authority.

Yet there is self-consciousness to this puppet, an awareness of his impotence. The puppet-like man is continually preoccupied with his own hands; he looks at them at the beginning of the play, cuts his fingernails part way through the play, and in his final gesture prior to the curtain, "[h]e looks at his hands" (44) again. This is a man decidedly in a world where his own instruments of capacity are no use, "despite a prehensile thumb."[28] They cannot prevent his being tortured, however much he might rebel, and as the play progresses his frustration turns to disillusion. As the man stares at his own impotent hands while the curtain falls the effect is one of witnessing his implicitly, silently, in mime, asking similar questions to those asked by Geulincx of his "guignol world":

---

[27] S.E. Gontarski, '"Birth Astride of a Grave': Samuel Beckett's Act Without Words 1," in *The Beckett Studies Reader*, ed. S.E. Gontarski (Gainsville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1993), 32.

[28] Ackerley and Gontarski, *Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 380.

> Why do so many and such great calamities conspire against me? Have I offended God in some way? […] Thrust into a body as if into a prison, am I paying the penalties that I have deserved, and among others this grave one, that I am oblivious of the offence that I am expiating? (*Ethics*, 351)

In order to see more clearly how *Act Without Words 1* functions within Beckett's changeable dynamics of suffering as an instance of tortured puppetry, however, the arguments will benefit by contrasting it with the later, short prose piece "Still."

"Still"

Written between 17 June and the end of July 1972,[29] "Still" has a multivalent relationship to what, in 1947 and 1948, Beckett referred to as his "series" of works.[30] Standing apart as an individual piece, the only one of the *Foirades*/*Fizzles* initially written in English (before Beckett's self-translation, something he undertook with most of his published texts), "Still" constituted some of the final work in that series. It was also the first text of the tripartite collection that includes "Sounds" (1972-3) and "Still 3" (1973). Both these later pieces received their first publication alongside an essay by John Pilling in *Essays in Criticism* (1978) in which Pilling praises "Still" as an achievement of Beckett's "syntax of weakness," a phrase Beckett used in correspondence with Barbara Bray in 1959 and again in an interview with Lawrence Harvey in 1962.[31] "Still" also conveys a tripartite series that is internal to the

[29] See Mary Bryden, Julian Garforth and Peter Mills, eds., *Beckett at Reading: Catalogue of the Beckett Manuscript Collection at The University of Reading* (Reading: Whiteknights Press and the Beckett International Foundation, 1998), 172.

[30] See C.J. Ackerley, *Obscure Locks, Simple Keys: The Annotated Watt* (Tallahassee, FL: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2005), 12, and Beckett to George Reavey, 8 July 1948, HRHRC.

[31] Beckett used the term in communication with Bray to describe his work in the second notebook in which he was composing the beginning of *Pim*, as *Comment c'est* was then called. On 11 March 1959 Beckett wrote, "I'm struggling along with the new moan, trying to find the rhythm and syntax of extreme weakness, penury perhaps I should say" (TCD MS 10948/1/22). I am grateful to Mark Nixon for his help with

text – before, during, and after a specific event; its first and third sections are comprised predominantly of strong declarative sentences describing the scene, one of stilled energy that is unsettled, in the piece's middle section, by the physical movement of the narrated protagonist's hand and head.

Even in this tripartite structure, "Still" retains traces of Beckett's fascination with Geulincx. Back in 1936, Beckett had transcribed a passage from Geulincx's *Ethics* that summarizes the importance of a tripartite structure for Geulincx; interestingly, it is a passage that in its English translation retains Beckett-like brevity:

> Totus fum (totus huc veniendo, totus hic agendo, totus hinc abeundo).[32]
>
> I have my whole being (in coming hither, acting here, departing hence). (*Ethics*, 337)

According to Geulincx, I live, or rather transit, my life entirely in relation to the fixed presence of God. I orbit God's stable presence – perhaps in a similar manner to that in which "Malone passes" the narrator of *The Unnamable* in their nether-world, along with what resembles "the pseudocouple Mercier-Camier" (4, 7), all of whom wheel round the apparently stilled narrator. Such a tripartite coming, being, and going had also served to structure the narrative of works prior to "Still." Parts of the six notebooks in which *Watt* was composed, for instance, set out from Beckett's concern with precisely these terms. As Cohn has noted, the character Watt emerges from the chrysalis of a first-person plural narrator through a conceptual apparatus of coming, being, and going:

> It is in A3, penned in several places while Beckett eluded the Nazis, that the character Watt moves to the forefront. On the

these quotations from TCD MS 10948/1. See also Lawrence E. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 249.

[32] Arnold Geulincx, *Arnoldi Geulincx Opera Philosophica, Volumes I-III*, ed. Jan Pieter Nicolaas Land (Hagae Comitum: Apud Nijhoff, 1891-1893), vol. 3, 37. Cf. TCD MS 10971/6/25.

> very first page Beckett lists: "1. The Coming; 2. Downstairs; 3. Upstairs. [These are grouped as "The Being."] 4. The Going."[33]

Aspects of this tripartite structure are then retained and echoed, in refined form, in the finished novel of 1953:

> Mr Knott was harbour, Mr Knott was haven, calmly entered, freely ridden, gladly left. (*Watt*, 115)

It is a pattern that echoes Beckett's transcriptions of Geulincx's description of ethical life and humanity's corresponding obligations, according to which "every Obligation of man is concerned with either coming hither, being here, or departing hence; in short, with *hither*, *here*, or *hence*" (*Ethics*, 350).

Yet "Still" reflects a Geulingian impetus in much more than its tripartite structure of the hand and head coming "*hither*" towards each other, being "*here*" if only for a moment with each other, before departing "*hence*" from each other. In *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski suggest that the nature of the middle section's movement itself, the protagonist's arm rising up to meet his head and his head lowering down to meet his arm, the action around which the work centers and which disturbs the surface of the first part's declarative stasis, "constitutes a return to the concerns of Geulincx and the Occasionalists."[34] These Occasionalist "concerns" to which Ackerley and Gontarski point are primarily metaphysical in nature. Paralleling Geulincx's ethical axiom of *ubi nhil vales, ibi nihil velis* is a metaphysical axiom that appears in Beckett's notes from both *Metaphysica Vera* and *Ethica*:

> Quod nescis quomodo fiat, id non facis.[35]
> What you do not know how to do, is not your action.[36]

---

[33] Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 110. "A3" is the third notebook of six, according to Cohn's own system.

[34] C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, 543.

[35] Geulincx, *Opera*, vol. 2, 150 & vol. 3, 207. Cf. TCD MS 10971/6/2v (*Metaphysica Vera*), TCD MS 10971/6/14v and TCD MS 10971/6/35 (*Ethica*).

This axiom summarizes the unusual epistemological criterion of Geulincx's Occasionalism, described above, which concludes that no one can be said to actually do anything at all, even something as simple as lifting an arm, because they do not how they could possibly do it.

"Still" describes physical movement as an occurrence that is separate from the protagonist thinking about this movement, let alone willing that movement. As the narrative pace is quickened in the transition from the first to the second section of the text, the nameless man's body seemingly moves of its own, or of someone else's, accord; "this movement impossible to follow let alone describe":

> The right hand slowly opening leaves the armrest taking with it the whole forearm complete with elbow and slowly rises opening further as it goes and turning a little deasil till midway to the head it hesitates and hangs half open trembling in mid air. Hangs there as if half inclined to return that is sink back slowly closing as it goes and turning the other way till as and where it began clenched lightly on end of rest.[37]

The man's right hand here takes "with it" the entire forearm. This right hand has the ability to hesitate, and it can seemingly choose to hang there, deciding on its own to return to the armrest. It is a steady and graceful movement that disturbs the declarative stasis of "Still"'s first part, and in this steadiness the movement contrasts with the body's un-still-able "trembling all over" (155) of the first part, thereby constituting an opposition of stasis to movement, as well as one of movement to stasis. The arm's graceful movement is described not wholly unlike a budding plant, its "opening leaves" referring not only to the arm's leaving behind the armrest, but like "slowly opening" and "opening further" also do, revealing a pastoral impetus in the movement that echoes both Arsene's contrarian diagnosis in *Watt*

---

[36] Arnold Geulincx, *Metaphysics*, translated by Martin Wilson (Wisbech: Christoffel Press, 1999), 35.

[37] Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose, 1950-1976*, edited by Mark Nixon (London: Faber, 2010), 156.

– that any budding will inevitably wither – as well as nature's sun and valley seen through the windows by the protagonist in "Still"'s first part. The scene also carries an echo of a Celtic past in "deasil," a Scottish (perhaps surprisingly not Irish) Celtic word which the OED defines as meaning "[r]ighthandwise, towards the right; motion with continuous turning to the right." The word connotes of magic, and of rituals involving people moving clockwise round a sacred stone or a significant building.

The movement of this hand, then, read by Ackerley and Gontarski as a "return to the concerns of Geulincx and the Occasionalists," can indeed appear to illustrate Occasionalist incapacity. The narrator does not substitute for God, "the Bastard, he [who] doesn't exist,"[38] a farcical astrological backdrop such as Suk's Horoscope in *Murphy*. But with the Celtic interjection (of a word that also appears repeatedly in 1964's "All Strange Away") nevertheless brings a hint of otherworldly magic, ritual and witchery to this familiar movement, yet one that in "Still" is made strange.

The fact that Beckett focuses specifically on the movement of a hand, as Geulincx does in *Ethics*, adds further weight to the suggestion that such movement draws upon Beckett's Geulingian interests. His emphasis, in the 1936 transcriptions from Geulincx, on the movement of a hand, arm or body follows examples given in *Ethica*. Transcriptions from *Metaphysica Vera*, for example, contain the following on the movement of a hand:

> *Manus nostra non movetur ad imperium voluntatis, sed ad concensum.*[39] But my hand is moved not at the command of my will, but by consent to it. (42)

For Geulincx, as we have seen, movement in the physical world is entirely dependent upon God's willing the action, a God who "in an ineffable manner conjoins certain motions" (*Ethics*, 231) with an individual's will. A

[38] '[T]he bastard, he doesn't exist' paraphrases a quotation from Hamm in *Endgame*, but Beckett reportedly also replied to a question from Edna O'Brien (who was writing an article for the *Sunday Times Magazine* in 1986) with the same sentence: '"God – do you have any thoughts you would like to air, about God?" "No … no … none … Wait, [vigorously] I do – the bastard, he doesn't exist"' (Edna O'Brien, "Samuel Beckett at 80," *The Sunday Times Magazine* [6 April 1986], 53).

[39] Geulincx, *Opera*, vol. 2, 270. Cf. TCD MS 10971/6/3v.

human body, according to Geulincx, has no more capacity for being independently influenced than any other material in the external world. Movement only takes place by a miracle of divine coordination. Thus, one is conjoined to all only when God wills it.

Intriguingly, however, there is a gulf of difference between the guignol worlds of *Act Without Words 1* and "Still." The slapstick music-hall knockabout of *Act Without Words 1* – which takes place under the bright light of a blazing sun, using comic props, with the man's action directed by sudden and surprising whistles – makes way for an interior that resembles Beckett's own house at Cooldrinagh, perhaps even Molloy's destination – his mother's room. The puppet-like movements themselves also change; there is slow and steady movement in place of what was rapid and jerky. Pilling notes how the stasis of "Still" enacts Beckett's simultaneous achievement and reconciliation with earlier authorial aspirations:

> Nothing better illustrates how far Beckett has travelled in forty years of writing than the way he has 'enlivened the last phase of his solipsism' not, as his 'sometime friend' Belacqua did (in *More Pricks than Kicks,* 1934), 'with the belief that the best thing he had to do was to move constantly from place to place', but rather with the belief that the best thing he can do is to keep still.[40]

How might such a transition in Beckett's guignol worlds, from movement to stasis, be thought of? What can be said about the nature of Beckett's "return to the concerns of" an apparent Occasionalist philosophy in his late work, beyond its echoes of earlier Geulingian themes and allusions? An answer to these questions reveals an important instance of Beckett's ability to combine different philosophical analects into a new, entirely coherent aesthetic idiom. It is a process that itself recalls Geulincx's multifaceted approach to philosophy. As the narrator of 1954/5's *From an Abandoned Work* put it, "[s]o in some way even olden things each time are first things, no two breaths the same, all a going over and over and all once and never more"

[40] John Pilling, "The Significance of Beckett's *Still*," in *Essays in Criticism*, XXVIII, no. 2, 1978, 143.

(*Texts*, 63). As this suggests, in "Still" Beckett combines an "olden" thing with a new "first" thing, in order to make something that is at once "a going over and over" old "concerns" and that is also "once and never more." It was, it appears, Beckett's reading Heinrich von Kleist at this time which prompted a "return" to the concerns of Occasionalism as a concern with puppetry. At least in part, it is Kleist who accounts for the huge differences between the guignol worlds of earlier work such as *Act Without Words 1* and that of "Still."

Kleist

Beckett's interest in Kleist's famous essay on puppetry and grace was first brought to light in Knowlson and Pilling's groundbreaking 1979 collaboration, prior to Knowlson sharpening the matter further in his biography of 1996.[41] When Beckett's interest was first reported in 1979 it was with an important caveat:

> If, on the little evidence available, there is no justification for speaking of actual influence, there is much common ground to be explored between Kleist's essay and Beckett's own ways of thinking about art, the theatre and life. (*Frescoes*, 277)

More than thirty years on there now appears to be a little more evidence for something resembling a complex kind of "influence." Beckett's interest in puppetry, an interest that betrayed a pivotal debt to Geulincx, was revived and intensified following what appears to be a discovery made by Beckett datable to late 1969, and that resulted from Beckett's friendship with Barbara Bray. It is clear from their correspondence that Bray frequently sent Beckett works to read, and this is what appears to have happened with Kleist. In a letter from Beckett to Bray, dated 2 September 1969 (around thirteen years into their voluminous correspondence), Beckett mentioned

[41] See James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (London: John Calder, 1979), 275-85; and James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 569, 584, 632-33.

what he called "grace in the Kleistian sense,"[42] and a month later he wrote: "Got the Kleist Marionetten theater ([?]) and other essays."[43] On 13 October of the same year, Beckett told Bray that he had "read Kleist's marvellous essay on Marionetten theatre with unforgettable anecdote of duel with bear."[44] There is also circumstantial evidence that points to these dates as Beckett's major period of thinking about Kleist. For instance, Knowlson reveals that in late 1969 Beckett went looking for Kleist's memorial at Wannsee (which he did not find), and not long after the correspondence with Bray in Autumn 1969, Beckett further mentioned Kleist on a number of occasions. During rehearsals for *Happy Days* in 1971, at the Schiller-Theater, Beckett was apparently trying to imbue Winnie with an air of what he had earlier termed "grace in the Kleistian sense":

> He was anxious to ensure that all of Winnie's movements should be as crisp, precise and economical as possible. He argued that precision and economy would produce the maximum of grace, quoting Kleist's essay on the Marrionetten theatre to reinforce his argument. (*Damned to Fame*, 584)

In 1976 Beckett again referred Knowlson and Ronald Pickup to Kleist. According to Knowlson, Beckett cited the essay on this occasion to "illustrate what he said about the relations between economy and the grace and harmony that he wanted to see in the movements of the protagonist of *Ghost Trio*" (632).

Kleist's *über das Marionettentheater* (1810) describes the marionettes of puppet-theatre as embodying a state of grace unattainable in a human world of self-consciousness. In a fictional dialogue between two men in a public park, narrated in the past tense by one of the interlocutors, Kleist uses a number of examples to argue that self-consciousness destroys the possibility of what he calls "grace." In one of these examples a "young acquaintance

[42] Beckett to Bray, 2 September 1969, TCD MS 10948/1/432.
[43] Beckett to Bray, 3 October 1969, TCD MS 10948/1/440.
[44] Beckett to Bray, 13 October 1969, TCD MS 10948/1/443.

of mine had lost his innocence before my very eyes."[45] An attractive youth of about fifteen, who had started to show "faintly the first traces of vanity, a product of the favour shown him by women," noticed that he resembled a well-known *Spinario* statue in one particular movement he made while putting his foot on a stool. The youth's interlocutor had apparently just been noting to himself this same resemblance, and the coincidence flattered the youth's burgeoning vanity. Yet as he tried to replicate the movement in the mirror in which he had originally noticed the resemblance, to witness it again, the movements that had once manifested his spontaneous grace became grotesquely comic; his consciousness of the movement prevented him from actually performing that movement again, even as his awareness of it taunted him with its proximity. Over the following year the boy's attractiveness entirely vanished.

A similar story involved the "fencing bear." Kleist tells of a bear (a paradigm naturally lacking human self-consciousness) that could fence better than any human because it would never be fooled by its opponent's feints, responding only to genuine thrusts, which it could successfully parry. The encounter is visceral and salutary for the bear's human combatant:

> No human fencer could equal his perception in this respect. He stood upright, his paw raised ready for battle, his eye fixed on mine as if he could read my soul there, and when my thrusts were not meant seriously he did not move. ("Marionette," 1212)

According to Kleist, marionettes embody the state of grace that was in the boy before his narcissistic fall, and in the fighting bear that responds only to what is authentically intended; the selfless puppet affirms and enables the state of grace that humanity's self-consciousness prevents.

For Beckett, this conclusion is comparable to and compatible with Geulincx's "guignol world," a world in which all is puppetry because all is dependent on God. Yet it is also different from Geulincx's thoughts along these lines, and Geulincx and Kleist taken together form something entirely

[45] Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," translated by Idris Parry (*The Times Literary Supplement*, 20 October 1978), 1211.

new – something that might be productively termed a philosophical poetics of suffering. According to Geulincx, humanity lacks knowledge of how it is connected to the world around it, yet there is a connection, and it is the work of humanity's "Pater ineffabilis"[46] ["ineffable Father" (*Metaphysics*, 97)]. God (as Beckett noted from Geulincx's *Metaphysics*) is "[t]he Author of this union"[47] between humanity and the world, and "neither we, nor our bodies, nor anything else, can move something without the cooperation of Him who is the author of motion."[48] Any motion that we experience is only thanks to God's use of it "as an instrument to engender various thoughts in our mind."[49] These "thoughts in our mind" are what distinguish Geulincx's puppetry from that of Kleist. Both Kleist's and Geulincx's puppets are dependent on an external authority for anything to happen. But with an awareness of being tied, Geulincx's puppets are subjected to further suffering – to perceiving their own enslavement. No Kleistian puppet has to suffer this further ignominy. For Kleist, no puppet is capable of attaining this awareness of its own state; it is precisely a lack of such self-awareness that brings about the "grace" of Kleist's puppets as one of blissful ignorance. A Geulingian "guignol world," then, is arguably a much crueler place than that of the Kleistian puppet-world.

Perhaps something like this distinction accounts for Beckett's description of Geulincx's world as "guignol," a world that is not just playfully puppet-like, but cruel and autocratic. Indeed, when he named Geulincx's world as "guignol," Beckett may have had in mind the Parisian *Théâtre du Grand-Guignol*, a theater once famous for its gothic depictions of murder, rape and suicide, its name for a time even becoming shorthand for confrontational, violent performances.[50] This conception of the more blatant savagery in

[46] Geulincx, *Opera*, vol. 2, 188. Cf. TCD MS 10971/6/5r.
[47] Geulincx, *Metaphysics*, 94. Cf. TCD MS 10971/6/5r.
[48] Geulincx, *Metaphysics*, 100. Cf. TCD MS 10971/6/5r.
[49] Geulincx, *Metaphysics*, 105. Cf. TCD MS 10971/6/5v.
[50] *Théâtre du Grand Guignol* was founded in 1897, and had its heyday (under various directors) in the first three decades of the twentieth century prior to its being taken over in 1930 by Jack Jouvin. After the Second World War the theater declined until eventually it closed in 1962. "Nous n'aurions pas pu concurrencer Buchenwald" [We could not compete with Buchenwald] was the assessment of Charles Nonon, the

puppetry was figured in the slapstick existentialist taunting of *Act Without Words 1* in 1956. Köhler's experiments, indeed, were designed precisely in order to discern whether or not the animals possessed anything approaching a careful definition of "intelligence." Bringing Kleist into contact with this imagining of puppetry would allow Beckett to present a new, unique world of both grace and horror. "Still" presents just such a hybridized "guignol world." The estranged action in the short, tense piece is not only that of returning, echoing Occasionalist disconnection and the horror it engenders. It is also a graceful action, a movement of steady, Kleistian puppet-like unselfconsciousness.

The nameless man of "Still" is one of Beckett's exhausted protagonists. He is almost totally collapsed, and not a little "[c]orpsed,"[51] as Clov describes the world outside the window in *Endgame*. His "side by side" legs are "*broken* right angles" seen in a "*failing* light." His "trunk likewise *dead* plumb" (emphases added), his arms, like his legs, are "broken right angles at the elbows" (155). From this crumpled and half-alive trembling pile a movement arises that is not fully resistance, yet neither is it fully resignation. As one part of his body comes together with another part, the extremities with the shell of interiority, the fingers with the head, a circuit is made that visualizes a kind of gentle, graceful climax of Beckett's late-period works. It is a climax constructed in realist, visualizing prose: an image that resembles the pose of Rodin's monument to poetic and philosophical reflection, the sculpture "The Thinker," and that locates this part of Beckett's late period as a period of imagistic philosophical poetics.[52] Beckett does not,

theater's final director, on why the post-war audience had less appetite for fictional visceral horror (quoted in Agnès Pierron, *Le Grand Guignol: le théâtre des peurs de la Belle Époque* [Paris: R. Laffont, 1995], xxxiv). There were, however, also accusations of wartime collaboration levelled at the theater. For a history of *Le Grand Guignol,* see Richard J.Hand and Michael Wilson, *The Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* (Exeter: Exeter University Press), 2002.

[51] Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, preface by Rónán McDonald (London: Faber, 2009), 20.

[52] Interestingly, "The Thinker" was originally intended by Rodin to represent Dante contemplating his epic poem while sitting beside the gate to Hell. Rodin's pose, then, of "broken right angles," the head in the hands, is an image of poetic as well as of philosophical thinking.

however, rest with this stillness for long. The intensely visual "Still" makes a sudden change in its final sentence, moving to a "*hence*" that veers entirely away from consolations and possibilities of the visual: "Leave it so all quite still or try listening to the sounds all quite still head in hand listening for a sound" (156). The achievements of philosophical, imagistic pause somewhere between resistance and resignation to the sufferings of a "guignol world" in the minimalist prose of "Still" are, as Krapp realizes of his life's highlights, only momentary and transient. Just as for Geulincx life is a fleeting orbit around a still point, for Beckett in 1972 a finely calibrated stasis cannot be still for long before it must become something else.